

This article really points out.....we need to listen to our kids

Year-round training and intense pressure to excel seems to be driving young athletes away from their game. Have we micromanaged the fun out of sports? Tralee Pearce reports
Article Comments (18) TRALEE PEARCE

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Until last week, Oakville, Ont. hockey player Stefan Legein was a poster boy for youth hockey. After star turns with the Canadian junior team and a stint with the Ontario Hockey League, he was drafted in the second round by the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets last year.

But last week, when the 19-year-old decided to call it quits on the eve of training camp, many observers wondered if youth hockey's gruelling expectations might be to blame.

"Not getting a break from that high-pressure environment can lead to burnout," says Scott Oakman, the executive director of the Greater Toronto Hockey League.

And if a successful player like Mr. Legein can lose his drive, what about the legions of kids who aspire to be him?

Enlarge Image

In his 20-year experience, youth hockey coach Ron Sticklee says it's more often the parents who have NHL stars in their eyes. (Glenn Lowson for The Globe and Mail)

Fall used to be the season in which kids would choose one or more sports to play outside school. Today, though, Labour Day signals very little; many have been hitting the ice or kicking a soccer ball all summer long to prepare for fall tryouts. Then comes the onslaught of more games, practices, drills and tournaments.

Coaches and sports administrators admit that the relentless pace exacts a price. "There's been a big shift in philosophy. There's much more year-round hockey taking place," Mr. Oakman says. "That certainly lends itself to kids dropping out of the game earlier than historically they would have. They might be getting a lifetime's worth of hockey in a shorter period of time."

There's no research to suggest that young kids who love their sport will risk burnout, says Joe Baker, an associate professor of kinesiology and sports health at York University. But with so much at stake, it's no wonder some kids don't speak up about not enjoying it.

That may be the case for Mr. Legein, who hasn't spoken publicly yet about his decision to quit.

It certainly looks to be the case for Brandon Regier, a 16-year-old hockey player who recently made news in Abbotsford, B.C., for his decision to give up his spot on the WHL's Brandon Wheat Kings this fall.

"It's never been my favourite thing to do in the world," he told the Abbotsford News this month. "Everyone's telling me they hope I change my mind."

His dad, Jeff Regier, admits he probably made it hard for Brandon, the youngest of four hockey-playing boys, to quit.

"We're a hockey family, so it's definitely not a good thing to tell your dad you're quitting hockey," he says, adding that it's hard to stay balanced in a sport that demands a huge commitment but can, at elite levels, help pay for college. "The parents are the competitive part of it," he says. "It's not the kids."

Beyond the mental strain, there are also growing reports of injuries due to intense training in single sports in the past five years, according to Tony Reynolds of the U.S. International Youth Conditioning Association, which provides youth-specific training programs to coaches.

In sports such as hockey in which players are dominant on their left or right side, lower back and shoulder injuries are cropping up at younger ages. "It's going to get worse," he says. (Mr. Legein suffered a separated shoulder in a Christmas World Junior game last year.)

Still, the coaches and leagues keep upping their offerings. Parents, even as they bemoan the cost and time commitment, keep signing their kids up for \$5,000 or \$6,000 sports seasons and \$7,000 summer training camps. Otherwise, they risk seeing their kids left out, says Vaughn Karpan, a former hockey Olympian who now works in scouting. But in the long run, he says, this may not benefit their kids much.

"The bar's been raised, but it hasn't. It's been accelerated," he says. "The kids with the most potential are still the kids with the most potential. Some kids are getting to their peak at a very quick pace. A lot of parents don't understand this."

In his 20-year experience, youth hockey coach Ron Sticklee says he has observed that it's more often the parents with NHL stars in their eyes.

While he can threaten to expel families in which kids are obviously pushed to emotional extremes by overbearing types, a player's quiet ambitions are nearly impossible to influence. All he can do is be responsive to kids who need a break.

He is currently coaching a teen who dropped out of high-level hockey about four years ago because "it was too much pressure." The player has come back to play in less competitive A-level minor hockey.

But even if a child is mentally and physically prepared for a hectic sports schedule, new research suggests throwing a kid's sports eggs in one basket can make him a worse, not better, player. York's Prof. Baker has been collecting data on athletes considered the "best of the best."

"Some of the data we have shows they spent a lot more time playing at their sport in an unorganized way," he says. Fewer rules and drills appears to promote a flexibility in the way kids think about problems on the court or rink.

Mr. Karpan says he's seeing this play out in the next generation of hockey players.

"We see a lot of kids who play the same way," he says. "We're getting into structure so early, we're sucking the life out of the game in a lot of ways."

Then again, branching out into more sports can amplify the headaches. A skilled kid who joins a soccer team as a summer reprieve from year-round hockey training can easily face pressure to stick with soccer in the fall. This week, a number of families will be pondering whether to switch sports or sign up for an even crazier schedule.

This scenario is one of the reasons one Toronto-area dad, John, is dialling the sports back in his family. "It's beyond over the top," he says of his three boys' sports schedules. In addition to hockey in the fall and winter, the boys, aged 9 to 13, play soccer or baseball in the summer.

They plan to drop all summer sports next year, says John, who asked not to be identified because the kids' coaches do not know of his plans.

Mr. Karpan says more parents should consider a step back, for the sake of the game. "We're getting them on the elite treadmill too soon and we're setting them up for disappointment."

Indeed, a little more family honesty and a lot less pressure from the hockey world might have saved the Regier family a good deal of tension and a lot of cash.

"I'm not holding any grudges," says Mr. Regier, a farmer. "But [Brandon] owes me \$300,000 in ice fees."

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